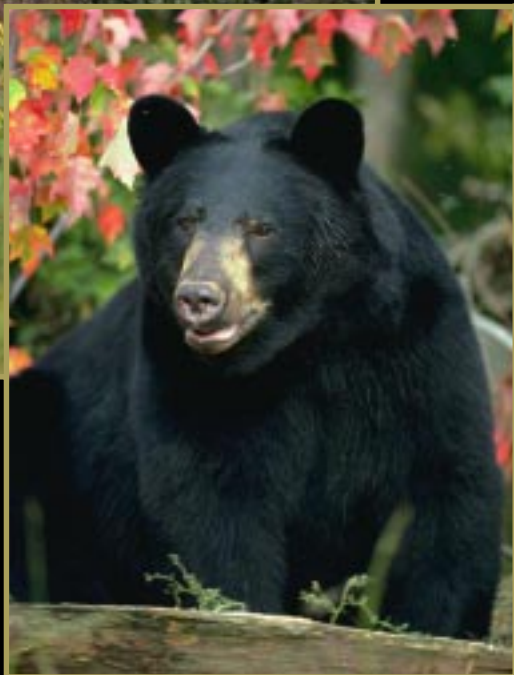




# Couple - Survives BEAR Attack

By SrA Connie Etscheidt, Malmstrom AFB, Mont.

Whatever activity you choose, safety comes first, and an awareness of what dangers your adventure could pose is of the utmost importance as one Air Force couple learned while hiking in Glacier National Park.



Second Lieutenant Jason Sansom, and his wife, Jamie, were visiting the national park for their first time in June of 2000. The couple went for a hike down one of the many trails the park offers when they noticed two bears walking along the same path about 15 yards ahead of them.

*"All four of us — my wife, Jamie, and I and the two bears — were spread out in different directions," Sansom said. "Jamie and I were hiding behind a tree. One of the bears seemed to stalk us somewhat — it seemed more curious than anything else. I was surprised when it stuck around."*

Bears may appear tolerant of people and then attack without warning. A bear's body language can help determine its mood. In general, bears show agitation by swaying their heads, huffing, and clacking their teeth. Lowered head and laid-back ears also indicate aggression. Bears may stand on their hind legs or approach to get a better view, but these actions aren't necessarily

signs of aggression. A bear may not have identified you as a person and is unable to smell or hear you from a distance.

In rare cases, bears may attack at night or after stalking people. These attacks are rare but can be serious because it often means the bear is looking for food and preying on you, as the black bear did with Sansom.

Individuals who are stalked or attacked should try to escape. If escape is impossible, or if the bear follows, use pepper spray, or shout and try to intimidate the bear with a branch or rock. Do whatever it takes to let the bear know you are not easy prey.

Sansom was behind a V-shaped tree, but the bear was on

the other side. The lieutenant said he wished he had known about bear spray then because it would've been the perfect time to use it without injuring himself. For almost 5 minutes, Sansom and the bear went around the tree as it tried to get him, and at one point it did.

*"It got my leg, but it only got my blue jeans," Sansom said.*

His wife, who was nearby, was able to throw something near the bear, taking it by surprise and making it back off. As it did, Sansom said he was able to find a better spot for more protection.

Park officials said individuals who encounter a bear should first try to back out of the situation. Park officials also said to never run or attempt to climb a tree unless there is enough time to climb at least 10 feet before the bear reaches the tree. If there is time to climb a tree, a non-food item, such as a cam-

era, should be dropped to distract the bear.

The bear stalked Sansom at his new spot for 10 more agonizing minutes when suddenly it charged at him.

*"At that point, I dropped to the ground and went into the fetal position," he said. "I made sure I gave myself the best chance for survival. I didn't let it have a chance to get any of my fingers; I gave it the outer part of my arm instead of the inner part of my arm."*

When an attack is imminent and the bear isn't going to go away, it's the correct thing to do to fall to the ground and take a fetal position. As a last resort to bear encounters, individuals

should play dead by curling into a ball and covering their neck and head with their hands and arms.

*"It started walking around me, smelling me, licking me and then it started biting my arms," Sansom said. "The bites weren't that severe at first, not very much blood or very much pain, but they got harder and harder."*

After seeing her husband being toyed with by the bear, Jamie knew there was nothing she could do and ran back down the trail for help.

As the bear's bites got harder and harder, Sansom's strength was getting weaker.

*"I couldn't take the pain anymore so I tried to find something to do," he said. "I got my car keys out of my pocket and put them on my fingers kind of like a knife. I struck at it. That took the bear by surprise and it backed up about 10 to 15 yards."*

This distance was all he needed to find safety again behind more trees. Sansom said the bear then had an on-again, off-again curiosity toward him. It would walk toward him, then go away and look up a tree or scratch some bark off a tree, he recalled.

*"It eventually got to the point where it went about 40 yards away from me down the trail and pointed in the opposite direction," he said. "I figured that was my best opportunity, and I just ran."*

Sansom said he was fortunate to have kept his wits about him the entire time, and park officials said that's the right thing to do.

They said to always keep a "cool" head and keep calm.

*"At no point did I think I was going to die," Sansom said. "I was just trying to be resourceful and trying to do the best thing for the two of us (Jamie and him), and when Jamie left, for my own safety."*

Sansom suffered from almost a dozen cuts on his arms and bruises on his chest. ➤

## When Confronted by a Bear

**Carry pepper spray.** If you are confronted by a bear and it is going to attack, pepper spray can be your savior. One word of advice, be sure before you spray you check the direction of the wind because this spray can backfire right into your eyes. This powerful spray can down a bear and give you ample time to remove yourself from the dangerous situation. Aim for the face and eyes of the bear. Once you have, the bear will turn and run away trying to remove the spray by rubbing with their paws or on the brush in the area.

**Keep a cool head.** This is a crisis situation and the worst thing you can do is panic and run. Never try to outrun a bear because they move much faster than you think. An average bear can run up to 25 MPH: a human doesn't have that capability usually.

**Never remove your pack.** Some people feel that the extra weight of a pack will hamper their agility in a confrontation with a bear. This is not true and in fact it provides extra protection to your body if the bear does grab, or roll on you.

**Roll, cover, and ball up.** If the bear looks as if it is going into a full confrontation, drop to the ground, roll into a fetal position, and cover your head, chest, and abdomen by rolling yourself into a tight ball. These areas are crucial areas and should be protected at all costs.

**Do not yell and flail.** Sure you're frightened, but again keep your head and DO NOT FLAIL your arms or yell during the attack. This could be misconstrued as aggression on your

part. At least that is what a bear may think. Usually if you allow the bear to roll on you and proceed with the attack and you're still in your tight ball, the bear will give up and deem you dead. Therefore, you again are no threat, and the bear will wander away. DO NOT MOVE until you are positive the bear is out of the area. Bears can and will re-attack if you decide to show signs of life or make noises. Be still and wait it out.

**Report.** If you are attacked by a bear, report this attack to the nearest Ranger station. They will want a full report and often they will track and tag the bear or remove it from the area if it is a known offender. With all that, bear attacks and confrontations of any type are easy to avoid if you follow these common sense steps.

**1)** At your campsite, never leave dirty dishes unwashed, lying unprotected. Left over food is a welcome mat for any animal in the wilderness.

**2)** Never leave cosmetics or soaps lying freely at your campsite. This again is a welcome mat especially for bears. Bears are attracted to scents, and the sweeter smelling the better the chance to have one come visit your campsite.

**3)** Animals are attracted to scents, and bears especially have been known to violently attack women who are on their monthly menstrual cycle.

**Remember,** while in the back country never put yourself in a situation where a bear attack could occur. But if it occurs, your best defense is your own common sense. Be alert and safe and enjoy your hike. ➤

